DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 614 CS 506 625

AUTHOR Bacheler, Virginia
TITLE The View from Here: Candidates' Thoughts on Local Televised Debates.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (80th, Ocean City, MD, May 3-7, 1989). A previous version was presented at the Annual Meeting of the New York State Communication Association (October 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Broadcast Television; *Debate; Debate Format; Interviews; *Political Campaigns; *Political Candidates; Political Influences; Political Power; Public Opinion
IDENTIFIERS Media Coverage; Partisan Elections; Strategic Planning

ABSTRACT

Televised political debate has become an expected element in most political races for public office: as important as door-to-door campaigning, as crucial as purchased media time, as strategized an element as scheduling press conferences. In order to address candidates' opinions of local televised debates, who should participate in them, and what role debates play in a candidate's overall campaign strategy, a study interviewed local candidates for public office in New York State, as well as party chairpersons and campaign advisors (nine persons in all). Results of the interviews showed that (1) candidates regarded debates as strategy--how to show a favorable aspect of themselves or their record while trying to expose some negative aspect about their opponent; (2) candidates were not uniform in their opinions of what is a desirable debate format although the majority agreed that some time for head-to-head confrontation between candidates is reasonable; (3) televised debates were a very important part in solidifying in the voters' minds which candidate to vote for; (4) candidates were not opposed to debating under most circumstances and cited only extreme examples when asked when would they not debate; and (5) candidates generally liked debating because they wanted to prove to themselves that they were good debaters, it built their self-confidence as a candidate, and it could spark a trend in post-debate coverage that could last for weeks. (A list of the interviewed candidates is attached.) (MS)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED306614

# "The View From Here: Candidates' Thoughts on Local Televised Debates"

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Virginia Bacheler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Presented at
Eastern Communication Association
Annual Convention
Ocean City, Maryland May, 1989

Virginia Bacheler
Assistant Professor
Department of Communication
SUNY Brockport
Brockport, NY 14420

(A previous version of this essay "Hit Me With Your Best Shot: An Insider's Perspective of Local Televised Debates" was presented at the New York State Speech Communication Association Annual Convention October 1988)

CS506625

"The View From Here: Candidates' Thoughts on

Local Televised Debates"

> "It's hard to believe that something as basic as [a debate] goes back to Lincoln/Douglas [and] still works in this technical age, but I think it is still one of the best ways to examine an incumbent's record... to have a face-to-face debate, and the more the better and the more types of formats, the better."
>
> Personal Communication, Bruce Baker,
> Issues Advisor to John Bouchard
> 1988 Republican Candidate for
> 30th Congressional District

It has become an expected element in most political races for public office: as important as the door-to-door campaigning, as crucial as purchased media time, as strategized an element as scheduling press conferences. It is the televised political debate. And since the rebirth of the televised presidential debate in 1976, more and more local races include televised debates as a component. This paper will address candidates' opinions of local televised debates, who should participate in them, and what role debates play in a candidate's overall campaign strategy. Just as a televised debate presence is expected in Presidential races, so too are similar fora expected at certain levels of local races including Congressional races and those for state level

government. While a televised debate of a local race will not necessarily gather a significant viewing audience, candidates ironically consider debates extremely important as a means of "reaching" viewers.

Method

The data for this essay was gathered from interviews conducted with local candidates for public office (both successful and unsuccessful) as well as party chairpersons and campaign advisors. These interviews were conducted between June 1988 and March 1989 and focus primarily on debates held in Rochester, NY in November 1988 but also include references to debates conducted during previous campaigns. A series of questions was posed to each respondent:

1) As a candidate/advisor/party chairperson, what do you like most/least about debates?
2) From your standpoint as a candidate/advisor/party chairperson, what is the most/least desirable format for a debate?
3) Should legitimate minor party candidates (those whose name will appear on the ballot) be included in a debate?

4) To what extent do debates help solidify the voter's the decision to vote for a specific candidate?

5) Under what circumstances would you not accept a challenge to debate?

6) What did your appearance on a TV debate do for you as a candidate?

7) In your opinion, are televised debates becoming a more significant means of reaching the voting public?

8) In hindsight, what would you do differently?

What Like Least and Most About Debates

Candidates regard debates as strategy - how to get a favorable aspect out about themselves or their record while hopefully exposing some negative aspect about their opponent. Most candidates interviewed like the opportunity to be on a platform, without script and without staged set, and express their views on issues.

> I think the debate process is the most useful tool for the candidate to get directly to the people about what his views are and frankly to expose the other candidate's weaknesses, to expose the other candidate's views which they may not want to disseminate to the public and I think there's not better format than a debate.
>
> (Personal Communication, J. Bouchard 2/20/89)

As this unsuccessful candidate for Congress further states, the alternative is a contrived paid media message or a sound sliver taken from a news conference that makes the 6 or 11 o'clock news. Challengers, not surprisingly, appreciate the opportunity to stand side by side with the incumbent and have their voices heard from the same platform. Name recognition, the chance to rebut their opponents statements, all weigh in the positive for doing debates. Plus, as one challenger noted, debates are very cost effective: you don't have to pay for the airtime. It may be somewhat ironic that candidates feel that televised debates are one of the most effective means of reaching the voting public, since relatively speaking, a small percentage of the voting public may actually watch a debate. Further adding to the problem, many races do not cover an entire viewing area - a State Senate seat may include only the western half of the county, a Congressional seat may include only two-thirds of a viewing area market. Already then, the televised debate will not be relevant to half of the potential viewing audience and it's questionable whether the debates - occurring as late as they often do in a campaign, are a significant element in the equation that adds up to a voter's decision of whom to vote for. Debates are a most welcome component in a campaign

yet the aspects candidates like least about debates far outnumber the desirable attributes as evidenced by the candidates interviewed for this essay. Yet despite that imbalance, candidates still wanted the televised debate in their campaign repertoire. What candidates cited as liking the least about a debate included the element of superficiality, that too much weight was placed on the debate (by the media, by the voting public who read/viewed the media covering the debate), that debates were a "great unknown". If you don't have all the facts at your fingertips, you could wind up losing the debate (if not the election) all for a seeming inconsequential element. (Personal Communication, L. Slaughter). One Congressional challenger was undone in a debate when the Republican opponent asked him what the "MX" in an MX missile stood for. A fact few voters probably knew or even cared about but the Democratic candidate didn't know the answer and had to admit so during the debate. Point for the Republican.

Debates are platforms for challengers, not for incumbents. Challengers will seek as many debates with an incumbent as possible because of the equal exposure it affords them. Incumbents, particularly well-financed, well-known and popular ones, will usually restrict debates as much as

possible: a local version of the Rose Garden strategy. As one Republican Congressional challenger in the 1988 campaign pointed out, he was helpless against the Democratic incumbent who, after one term in office, chose to do one debate and one debate only and that one on public television. (This after debateing the previous Republican incumbent at least five times two years earlier.) The Republican challenger could not set the conditions, the incumbent could: regarding where she would appear and under what circumstances. What this particular challenger liked most about the debate which did take place on live television was that he was on an equal footing - able to ask questions and rebut answers with the Democratic incumbent. Trying to get a vantage point from which to attack the Democrat's position on protectionist trade policies, this Republican challenger often felt the media viewed his opinions as sour grapes. But the debate offered him the opportunity to ask questions, have her answer them and then he could rebut them - a scenario he had campaigned for and which she had been successful limiting.

Formats

Formats for televised debates are a negotiable item between the campaign staffs of the candidates and the television

station producing the debate. (None of the debates referred to in this essay were produced by third party sponsors such as the League of Woman Voters.) More and more stations are producing their own debates without the benefit of third party sponsorship now that the FCC has ruled stations may sponsor and cover their own debates as bona fide news events. As one campaign advisor mused,

> I look enviously at Jim Baker [campaign chairman to George Bush] and this ability to sort of dictate the terms of the presidential debates.
>
> (Personal Communication, B. Baker 3/6/89)

If the incumbent and the station are of the same mind regarding format, then it is up to the challengers to agree to participate. But if the incumbent is not willing to participate, stations can be at a loss to present a debate. An empty podium makes for a dramatic moment on live television but not for a full hour. The television station is concerned with serving the public interest while at the same time presenting a reasonably interesting television program that will generate an attentive audience that will stay tuned.

Candidates are not uniform in their opinions of what is a desirable debate format although the majority would agree

that some time for head-to-head confrontation between candidates is reasonable.

Most candidates interviewed wanted some time for rebuttal - to be able to confront what their opponent said directly. Not having that time would render the appearance just that - a joint appearance and not a time to publicly discuss differences directly. Interestingly, one advisor pointed out that election debates are a unique format likely not repeated once a candidate is elected.

> The thing that candidates tell me is that once you get elected, you never have to do this kind of debating. So in that sense, it's very artificial that when you're invited to be on a TV talk show or at a committee hearing, it's going to be a much more collegial setting: raising points and responding to other people's points and it's not going to be this barrage of questions back and forth.
> QUESTION: Until the next time you run?
> ANSWER: That's right, until you run for re-election, and then you try to avoid it.
>
> (Personal Communication, B. Baker, 3/6/89)

Depending upon whether the candidate is an incumbent or a challenger often determines that candidate's position on the number of debates there should be. Conventional wisdom held uniformly by all candidates and advisors interviewed was that if you are the incumbent, have high name recognition among voters and polls show you have a lead, limit debates to as

few as possible. If you are a challenger, lobby for as many debates as you can to afford yourself the opportunity to stand on the same platform as the incumbent. Two unsuccessful challengers vowed that had they won their races and should they run in the future, they'd debate their opponents as often as they are asked to do so. A successful candidate for county executive had lobbied for a number of debates with the 16-year incumbent but succeeded in getting only one. Now that the challenger is in office, he too vows to debate when he runs for re-election. The challenger in the 30th Congressional race in 1986 succeeded in getting no fewer than five debates with the first term incumbent and won. In 1988, running for re-election, this now first term incumbent adopted a Rose Garden strategy: claiming an excessively busy schedule in Washington and that a debate was not the best way to get her message out to the voters. Being the incumbent, she restricted the campaign to one debate on public television. Debates were not a format she personally liked. She had seen predecessors fall under a trick question and didn't like putting herself at risk in a live debate situation.

Third Party Candidates' Participation

In addition to the sentiment regarding how many debates there should be in a given campaign being decided by whether one is the incumbent or the challenger, the issue of whether third party candidates should be included is decided on similar lines. The more candidates posed opposite an incumbent, the less time the major party challenger has to confront the incumbent: less time for questions, rebuttals, and answers. Now the minor party candidates suddenly have equal footing with the major party opponent: a definite advantage for the incumbent and a point not lost on any of them. Ideally, incumbents, challengers (some of them) and political party officials will say that yes, all legitimate candidates on the ballot should participate in a debate. But from there the argument breaks down. A campaign advisor for a 1988 Republican Congressional candidate put it succinctly:

> I think the thing is to have one debate that would be a one-on-one [between the two principle candidates] We want to give the voters a chance to see other candidates [meaning third party candidates] but there should also be that opportunity for a one-on-one debate.
> QUESTION: Unless you're the incumbent?
> ANSWER: That's right, unless you're the incumbent.
>
> (Personal Communication, B. Baker, 3/6/89)

An active Conservative candidate who has run for a number of offices in the past 13 years including Congress, says that only candidates from organized political parties should participate in debates: in this particular county only three parties are so organized: the Republican, the Democratic and the Conservative parties. Party officials and candidates point to a limit of numbers and time: three or even four candidates for a race may be possible to include in a debate but any more than that and the resulting program would be confusing to the viewing public.

> The real problem is, are you going to miss out hearing from the two people who have a chance of winning the debate: are you going to end up with an artificial debate? So that the public never gets a sense of knowing who these two people are... [Yet] I personally have a hard time telling a legitimate candidate that they don't have a right to be heard.
>
> (Personal Communication, F. Weisberg, 7/27/88)

Hardliners view the presence of third party candidates as just clouding the issue:

> If the issue is getting information to voters, if you have a half hour format and instead of the two people who have a reasonable chance of being elected, you have four people, each of them being given equal consideration, then you are depriving the voters of information they need to have to make an informed choice.
>
> (Personal Communication, B. Zartman, 7/12/88)

Interestingly, one Republican campaign advisor thought that third party candidates made no difference to a debate, that they amounted to nothing more than a sideshow. In fact, he felt the third party candidate in a local Congressional race should participate in debates and be exposed for running without the intention of winning.

> Let's bring that out in a debate. If I were Bouchard [the Republican candidate], I'd want Cook [the Conservative] up on that stage so I could bring that point in a debate and show that for what it is.
>
> (Personal Communication, A. DiPasquale 8/30/88)

Contrast that to the view of the Republican Candidate who wanted nothing to do with a three-way debate, who even threatened to pull out of the one scheduled televised debate because of the presence of the Conservative candidate.

> I thought that [the presence of the third candidate] unfortunately diluted the effectiveness of this debate because if it had been a one-on-one debate between [the Democrat] and me with questions back and forth, we probably could have had 40 percent more questions answered, i think the people would have been able to see the contrast between the two legitimate candidates for Congress... and I think the public would have been better served.
>
> (Personal Communication, J. Bouchard 2/20/89)

This candidate's issues advisor lobbied long and hard for a change in the rules of the debate that was staged in this race, but four months after the election he could look back somewhat philosophically and say that yes, from an incumbent's standpoint the more candidates (he referred to them as a "gaggle of candidates"), the better, while if you're the challenger, it's going to make your job that much more difficult since such a format would not afford the challenger the opportunity to cross examine the incumbent. Interestingly, when asked if the tables were turned and his Republican candidate was the incumbent next time would he advise his candidate to debate, this advisor said no. If that was not possible, then he would negotiate the terms of the debate as favorably to the candidate as possible and argue to include as many third party candidates as possible.

Clearly then, the willingness to include minor party candidates is couched in terms of whether the appearance of these add-ons will benefit the candidacy of the major party players. Yes, their arguments may be stated in terms of what best suits the voting public, but outside the heat of the campaign moment, candidates, advisors and party officials alike will look at the inclusion of third party candidates as strategy.

Debates Solidify Voters' Decisions?

All of the candidates and party officials interviewed for this essay agreed that televised debates were a very important part in solidifying in the voters' minds which candidate to vote for. This is quite in contrast with how television station personnel view debates. The debates are important because the candidates see them as important. How influential debates are with voters is questionable. As one Democratic first term county executive put it, debates tend to confirm trends, not to break trends or start new ones. (Personal Communication, T. Frey 9/13/88). Indeed, the spin-off coverage in newspapers and other media following a televised debate can confirm what voters have been hearing prior to the debate.

> Each time there's a debate, there's a 1-A story [in the newspaper] ... and in fact last year [the newspaper] did polling as to who won the debate. The media and us [sic] play off it a great deal.
>
> (Personal Communication F. Weisberg 7/27/88)

This Democratic Party chairwoman sees the debate as just another element in the strategy menu from which a campaign is designed.

> People must be hit several different ways and then they go 'oh yeah' and the debate is just one more way they get hit. It's one of about seven.
>
> (Personal Communication, F. Weisberg 7/27/88)

A first-time Republican Congressional candidate sees debates as the one opportunity to flush out what a candidate's particular position is on any given issue.

> It's very easy in a news bite or in a TV commercial to get a message across that is tailored to a certain audience and [so] innocuous that it doesn't offend anybody. And a debate and the coverage that comes after it, of taking bites out of that debate, people can say 'so that's really what their position is on this issue'.
>
> (Personal Communication J. Bouchard 2/20/89)

It would seem somewhat naive on the part of this candidate that local news coverage would pick out the most representative sound bite to feature on the 11 o'clock news. Reporters will pick out the sound bite that was newsworthy but not necessarily the most representative of a candidate's speech or debate performance. This particular candidate was pleased with his performance, he felt he got in some jabs at his Democratic incumbent opponent and because the incumbent limited the number of debates to just one, he felt the debate

was an extremely important element in his campaign. Had he been able to have just a one-on-one with the incumbent without the presence of the Conservative candidate, this Republican challenger felt the voters would have seen the difference much more clearly.

But debates are an element that the public can partake of or not. By virtue of the fact that debates occur so late in the campaign calendar --often just a week or two before Election Day -- and because the viewing audiences are so relatively small, debates have little bearing on solidifying voters' decision of whom to vote for. It is theater, it is an opportunity to see the candidates perform, perhaps stumble, but it is in most cases not a decisive factor.

Under What Circumstances Would Candidates Not Debate

Candidates were not opposed to debating under most circumstances and cited only extreme examples when posed the question on when would they not debate. The Democratic Congresswoman said that although she personally didn't like debating, the only circumstance under which she would refuse to debate would be if a LaRouche candidate would be present. A Conservative primary posed an interesting situation for the

Republican Congressional candidate seeking Conservative endorsement. Seeking to portray himself as more conservative than the Democratic challenger but not as a staunch right-wing Conservative, the Republican candidate wanted to debate the Conservative candidate. Likewise the Conservative wanted to debate the Republican but only on a few issues: the litmus test questions of abortion, prayer in schools and the Equal Rights Amendment. No television station was willing to air a debate prior to the Conservative primary since there were only 4200 voters enrolled. Thus the two candidates were left to stage their own debate. In this case, the Conservative challenger was the Conservative party chairman, held all the traditional Conservative party positions on key issues and was running not to win but to preserve the Conservative endorsement of a bona-fide Conservative. The Republican candidate knew that to debate the Conservative challenger on only the litmus issues would be political suicide - he would risk losing support from Republicans if he was thought to be too Conservative. The debate never took place. The Republican candidate lost the Conservative primary and ran for Congress in a three way race. He ultimately lost in the general election.

This particular Congressional race was considered by the

media to be the premier "hot" race in Rochester, NY of 1988. The public television station sponsored a debate, inviting all three candidates (a Right to Life candidate was running but was deemed not be running a bona fide campaign based upon FCC guidelines). The Republican candidate, who so desperately wanted to debate his Democratic challenger face to face almost pulled out of the televised debate because of the presence of the Conservative "spoiler". A week prior to the debate, the Republican finally agreed to participate knowing that this would be his only chance to face his Democratic opponent head-on. Post debate, the Republican admitted that he knew he would ultimately appear despite the three way format, but his advisors lobbied hard to make it a "legitimate" debate between the two "legitimate" candidates. It also should be noted that the television station wields more than a little power, since it could go ahead with a debate between the Conservative and the Democrat and show an empty podium where the Republican would have been. The press coverage would have been devastating.

As the Democratic Party chairwoman put it, if your candidate is comfortable with the debate format and is good at it, by all means, push for debates, otherwise minimize that kind of exposure. She conceded, however, that if the media

determined that a particular race was worthy of a debate, then the candidate, no matter how uncomfortable in that format, would likely not be able to get away without doing at least one debate. (Personal Communication, F. Weisberg, 7/27/88)

What Did Appearance on TV Debate Do For Candidate?

It may be that a debate appearance does more morale boosting for the candidate himself than for the voting preferences of the public. Candidates generally like debating because it proves to themselves that they're good debaters, it builds their self-confidence as a candidate and it can spark a trend in post-debate coverage that can last for weeks. A Republican Congressional candidate found the debate lent validity to his effort to unseat a popular Democrat:

> I think it validated many of the things I believed in ... I ran to win but I recognize that I was a totally unknown 32-year-old county legislator running against an extremely well-known, extremely popular candidate who also had the tremendous advantages of incumbency and a Democratically controlled House of Representatives that would provide certain things for her during the campaign ... Not to be self-laudatory,, but I think I proved to myself if no one else that I could measure up.
>
> (Personal Communication, J. Bouchard 2/20/89)

Did The Challenger Feel Manipulated By Incumbent

Debates are an opportunity for the underdog (usually the challenger) in any given race to stand on a platform next to the other candidates and respond to questions. The incumbent is the gatekeeper on whether debates will take place at all: refusing to debate can generate negative press coverage but the fact remains that without the incumbent, the forum would not be a debate. As one Republican campaign advisor put it, running against an incumbent is

> like being inside a bag punching out, because you're completely enveloped by the power of incumbency.. There is so much a Congressman can do to shape the voters' perception of how good a job they're doing and I think that's why the re-election rate is as high as it is -- 98% in 1988.
>
> (Personal Communication, B. Baker 3/6/89)

And yet there are the enigmas: there are incumbents who will debate their opponents as many times as they are invited to do so. In 1986, a first term Republican Congressman debated his Democratic female challenger no fewer than five times during the course of the campaign. This Republican was confident that his debating experience at Oxford, England would carry the day. It did not. In another example, a State Legislator seeking his third term agreed to debate his well-known Democratic opponent at least five times. Probably

the great number of debates was influenced by the fact that the incumbent had been indicted (but later cleared) of misappropriating campaign funds during his previous bid for re-election. The multiple exposures in the 1988 campaign brought him a convincing win.

Hindsight

Looking back on their failed or successful campaigns, the advisors and candidates interviewed for this essay each had learned valuable lessons regarding debates.

The unsuccessful Republican challenger in the State Legislature race wished he had sent out a direct mailing to his district several days before the debate, notifying voters of the time and date of the broadcast. Having received between 50 and 75 calls after the debate commending him on his convincing performance, this candidate mused that perhaps more voters might have been swayed to vote for him had they seen him head-to-head with the incumbent. The unsuccessful Republican Congressional candidate said that he would always be true to his own style. Having run a commercial depicting his opponent as a puppet (complete with look-alike actress and strings attached to head and arms),

this challenger felt that the strong statement of the commercial had backfired and wasn't typical of his personal style. His issues advisor vowed that next time around a person within the campaign would be delegated to round up business for television debates to get stations to schedule them early and often.

The county Democratic party chairwoman echoed similar thoughts, saying that she wanted to sit down with news directors and "sell" them on the idea of covering certain races.

> I want to sit down with each news director - not to tell them what to do but to give them substantive background on who we are. I just cringe sometimes ... we do tons of press conferences on substantive issues and it gets lost [in the newscast].
>
> (Personal Communication, F. Weisberg 7/27/88)

Conclusion

Candidates - be they incumbents or challengers - generally like the idea of debates so long as they feel than can benefit from them. The free airtime, the pre-debate promotion by a station and newspapers, the post-debate mortem by all the media in a given market can add significant attention to a given race. But debates being what they are, they are

often additional icing on an already well-known cake. Debates involving races of lesser interest or involving races where an incumbent is considered a virtual shoo-in will rarely be featured in a debate format. Debates are television, after all, and television programs are put on the air to gather an audience.

While candidates, their advisors and party officials interviewed uniformly think that debates are an important element in the campaign strategy, one has to ponder how truly influential debates are. More likely, they tend to confirm a voter's decision of whom to vote for (Personal Communication, F. Weisberg). No doubt, the national televised presidential debates influence local debates in terms of there being local debates at all. And as long as there are national debates, so too will there likely continue to be some form of local political debates. Local television stations will continue to seek to serve the voting public with televised debates that will appeal to as wide a viewing audience as possible. And despite the risks, local candidates will continue to seek out televised debates because from their perspective (accurate or not), it's one of the best ways to reach the voter. If nothing else, it proves them worthy of the contest.

## APPENDIX

Those interviewed for this essay were:

1) Rep. Louise Slaughter (D) Congresswoman, 30th Congressional District

2) Tom Frey (D), Monroe County Executive Rochester, NY

3) Tom Cook (C), Chairman, Monroe County Conservative Party Rochester, NY

4) Barbara Zartman (R), former Chairwoman, Monroe County Republican Party

5) Fran Weisberg (D), Chairwoman, Monroe County Democratic Party

6) Alex DiPasquale (R) former Deputy County Manager and advisor to Lucien Morin (R), former County Manager, Monroe County Rochester, NY

7) Bruce Baker (R) issues consultant to John Bouchard

8) John Bouchard (R) candidate in 30th Congressional District, 1988

9) Ralph Esposito (R) Candidate in 55th State Senate Race for New York State Legislature, 1988